

Rotterdam, 5 January 2003

Integration

Liberalism strives to create a society of emancipated citizens, upstanding men and women who form their own opinions and venture to speak them freely, and who act in accordance with their own judgement in a spirit of freedom and responsibility.

The VVD is a liberal party and is thus a party of emancipation. This also applies - and emphatically so - in relation to women. Indeed, the first Dutch woman to hold a position in government was a member of the VVD.

Over the past thirty years or so, our country has experienced a large influx of women who find themselves in a disadvantaged situation. They often have an Islamic background and many of them have to contend with discrimination in their immediate surroundings. This is an inadmissible state of affairs.

Those who fail to see the discrimination against Muslim women that is going on are simply refusing to face facts. Instead of criticising this wanton abuse, they gloss over it with references to multiculturalism.

We live in a free country where everyone can come and go as they please, pray to the god of their choice, switch from one god to another and exercise the right of free speech. Ours is a pluralist society.

That said, however, there have to be common standards respected by all. These are anchored in our constitution and no amount of multiculturalism can be allowed to erode them. One of those standards is equality between men and women and everyone in our country must acknowledge and strive for that equality.

No religion or culture may serve as a pretext for negating this equality. Multiculturalism must never result in abuses being condoned by taking the attitude that "that's how they do things in their culture".

Such an attitude is born not of tolerance but of laziness, laxity and cowardice. It is cowardly because it reflects a fear of being tarred with the epithet "racist" for criticising reprehensible practices in other cultures. It is tantamount to saying that everyone has a "right" to remain consigned to their particular ethnic slot and remain accordingly disadvantaged. That is an interpretation of multiculturalism which I reject. And that is why I also reject the slogan "Integration with retention of identity".

People who come to our country from other cultures must be aware of what our constitution says and they must act accordingly. Two imams recently unleashed a tirade of invective against democracy, political parties and equality between the sexes. Such behaviour is unacceptable. If those imams are not Dutch nationals, they should be deported immediately. The government must take action against anyone seeking to sabotage the integration of ethnic minorities.

But will the government deport such imams? I think not. We have forgotten how to act decisively and this is a sign of decadence. Any attempt at resolute action is thwarted by do-gooders who accept everyone's point of view and deny that anything is amiss.

I have no time for those who deny the equality of men and women, oppose freedom of expression, refuse to respect the separation of Church and State and will not accept that people have a right to change their religion.

It is unacceptable that a woman should require police protection simply because she wishes to express her opinion. Do we live in a free country or not?

Christianity and the Bible have been subject to a tidal wave of criticism for around five hundred years. Why should we not be entitled to criticise Islam and the Koran? Do we live in a free country or not?

Let us not mince our words. We should not always see ethnic minorities as victims. They are to be seen not as groups to be pitied but as fully-fledged citizens. We must talk to them, in Dutch, about their responsibilities.

We have to address them directly and not via "representative bodies". Numerous organisations claim to speak on behalf of ethnic minorities and are subsidised by the government. Do these organisations promote integration? Are they interested in the emancipation of immigrant women? Or is it in their interest to keep ethnic groups together for as long as possible?

I would ask the government to go through the plethora of these representative bodies with a fine-tooth comb with a view to drastically reducing such subsidies.

All these issues should be addressed with the greatest urgency. In my view, the integration of ethnic minorities is the most pressing problem facing the Netherlands. Within but a few short years, the populations of our four big cities will have a predominantly non-western background and the majority religion will be Islam. It is high time to speak about these matters in plain terms.

A few months ago, a group of Moroccan youths set upon a Jew in Amsterdam's Dam Square, the site of a Second World War memorial, forcing him to seek refuge in the Krasnapolski hotel. When I heard about this incident, I was not angry, I was furious.

Our slogan has always been: restrict immigration, promote integration, combat discrimination. It is in everyone's interest that the VVD continues along that path in order to ensure that we can go on living in a land of free people.